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New OPCW Head Appointed

ARMS CONTROL TODAY

September 2002

By Rose Gordon

On July 25, members of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) chose Rogelio Pfirter, a former Argentinean undersecretary for foreign policy, to head the international body for the next four years.

The OPCW, which is responsible for implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), had been without a director-general since April, when Brazilian José Bustani was ousted by a special session of CWC states-parties. (See [ACT, May 2002](#).)

The United States led the initiative to remove Bustani from office. In a speech to states-parties shortly before Bustani's removal, Donald Mahley, the U.S. representative to the OPCW, charged the director-general with destroying staff morale, mismanaging funds, and refusing to consult with member states. Bustani dismissed the charges in repeated statements to the press and OPCW members.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher rapidly signaled U.S. approval of the new OPCW leadership, saying July 25 that Pfirter “will do an excellent job.”

One of the primary challenges facing the new director-general is the budget shortfall the OPCW has experienced since January 2001, which resulted in the organization completing little more than half of its chemical industry inspections last year. Assuring members that he shares their budget concerns, Pfirter said during his acceptance speech at The Hague, “[O]ne of my top priorities will be to ensure appropriate funding in 2003.”

In a telephone interview August 23, Deputy Director-General of the OPCW John Gee, who served as acting director-general after Bustani's dismissal, called the organization's financial situation “precarious” and cited late payments from the four member states that possess chemical weapons as a major strain on the budget.

The United States, Russia, India, and South Korea have declared to the OPCW that they possess chemical weapons. According to the CWC, which outlaws chemical weapons, member states must themselves fund the destruction of their weapons, including paying for the continual presence of OPCW inspectors at destruction sites.

Gee said that the member states' recognizing this as a budget problem was the first step in correcting it, adding that the OPCW has established a more efficient invoice system that he hopes will result in rapid repayments for OPCW services from the four possessors in the future.

Inaccurate assessment of budget needs has also contributed to budget problems, Gee said, but noted that it is “very difficult” for the chemical weapons states to know a year or more in advance what their destruction operation costs will be. This uncertainty makes it difficult for the OPCW to predict the number of inspectors needed, especially as the pace of destroying chemical weapons accelerates during the next few years.

The OPCW's executive council, an administrative body composed of 41 elected members, will address the budget during a September 10-13 meeting.

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